

## The Rungan Sari/ BCU Experience – so far...

Rosella Vaughn

Volunteering at Bina Cita Utama School in Rungan Sari has been a really wonderful experience so far. I arrived here at the end of January and have successfully made it past the first month. Unlike most people suggested, I haven't been through some kind of phase where I felt completely out of place and didn't know why I had come. It was quite the opposite. Coming here was the first thing that I've been sure of in a long time: I've been experiencing a great feeling of purpose. I had something to offer that the school could use, so I'm now teaching Biology and Social Studies at the high school level.

What was even more important was how I was welcomed with open arms the moment I got here. I was invited for dinner all over the place – especially during my first week. Maia Jones, who has taken up the new job as volunteer coordinator, did a great job with picking me up and introducing me to the community and school. Karim and Rashidah MacDonald have supported me very much, as well as many other people in Rungan Sari. The community may not be what most people are used to in size, but it makes up for that in great diversity and heart. Everyone is willing to help one another. Daniela Bustillo always offers me a place to hang out if I want to retreat and rest from the busy life at the boarding house.



Karim and Rashidah MacDonald

But really, life at the boarding house is nothing as bad as I imagined. The girls have really grown on

me. There are another two young female teachers and four students living in this spacious house with me. The students share two rooms and we teachers have a room each to ourselves. There are several bathrooms, a wide living area and kitchen. It's quite nice to have staff cleaning the house and preparing meals. That gives me lots of time to indulge in many newly discovered hobbies, such as playing the guitar for hours (a guitar here is purchased for a mere \$70), basketball, swimming and diving around in the pool, watching movies and generally enjoying the time spent with new friends. People here come in all age groups, cultures, shapes and sizes. Some give great hugs to be recommended (with Rashidah and Gay surely being among the noteworthy), and others will play soccer and basketball every day, no matter how hot it is (and it is hot here... always!).



Rungan Sari Resort swimming pool

But you do find ways to cope with the heat. The school is equipped with air conditioning, and most people here with well established homes have learnt to keep the cool in. Drinking plenty of water is a must, but my father always did tell me to carry a water bottle no matter where I go; and I've stuck by that rule. And, as with anything, you will get used to the heat. I don't know if I have yet, but I reckon I will soon enough.

The heat of course is not all that is notorious about life at Rungan Sari. Before I came here, there were two other "major" issues I'd heard about. The first was the cultural differences, and the second was the mosquitoes/bugs. With regard to both I can only say it's much less than most people led me to believe. The bugs generally keep to themselves. But if you choose to be

outside between sunset and sunrise, it is recommended to spray on a little mosquito repellent; but that comes in nice smells and soft skin-caring varieties here, so it's not much to worry about. The the bugs are not so bad either; and I heard that if you do run across a big spider you're allowed to call the headmaster himself – even in the middle of the night – to get rid of it. I have not yet needed to make use of this service, but it's nice to know it exists! Since the boarding house is kept very clean, there are very few incidences to speak of.

And when it comes to cultural differences, coming here you realise that the locals are very willing and happy to accept you as you are, if you can do the same. And it's hardly an alien universe. Rungan Sari, especially, is quite the western haven in the middle of Central Kalimantan. The houses are well insulated and kept clean by the employed staff. The toilets are nice and western, as well as the showers. The towns around here, only partly explored so far, are small and lively. They have markets on the weekend that are worth visiting and offer most of your vegetable and fruit needs. Dressing respectfully is one of those things that come naturally, and it's not as extreme as some people say. As well as Muslims, there are also many Christians. Clothing to your knees and covering your shoulders is the guideline, but the people here in Rungan Sari have been known to shorten the shoulders every now and then – but who wouldn't understand that in this heat?



Students painting the Assembly Hall at the BCU school

Now I've written much about living here – but what of the teaching? The children are like children everywhere, but, with around 75 students, this school is still quite young and small, making the student body a tightly knit pack, not unlike a family. The older kids who have been at BCU many years take care of the younger ones, and everyone embraces new students with open arms. And new students are coming steadily and surely. This feeling of familiarity can be felt in the classes. The students may be as interested, lazy, motivated or excited as you find at any other school, but there is a much deeper feeling of mutual respect, and even affection, among the students than I have had the privilege to experience before.

I hope the students can learn as much from me as I feel I will learn from them and my experience here at BCU and in Rungan Sari.